

The Work Breakdown Structure: WBS Myths & Project Fortune-Tellers



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Summary: We have a little fun as a gypsy fortune teller looks at a PM's WBS and forecasts the results the project will achieve. The unfunny part for some of the PMs is that she is correct about their fate.

A project manager strolled through a carnival's red and white-striped tents and spotted a man in a red silk shirt hurling knives. The knife-thrower dared the project manager to stand on the whirling wheel-of-death while he threw knives blindfolded.

The PM scoffed, "That's no big deal, I get that treatment everyday from my stakeholders." The PM held aloft a thick WBS and shouted, "But even your razor-sharp blades can't penetrate this, it's the mother of all project work breakdown structures!"

The project manager, WBS in hand, was intent on a gray silk pavilion. Here the PM would find out the fate of this new project. Here Madam PMBOK, the project fortune-teller, would reveal the future.

The PM stooped low, sidled into the tent's darkness and spotted Madam PMBOK dancing what appeared to be a Gypsy version of the Macarena.

"How may I heeeeelp you?" the old crone panted between aerobic breaths.

"I want to know my fate. How will my new project turnout? Will they love my work?"

"Let us see what the future holds. Let me see it," Madam demanded.

The PM extended a hand, palm up.

Madam PMBOK snorted, "I don't read palms, my little sliced sausage. Let me see the work breakdown structure. Only from that can I "see" your project's future and what type of PM you will be: scheduling clerk, order taker or a deliverer of business achievements."

The PM opened the thick plan and held it for her. Madam PMBOK slowly flipped through the pages, running a finger down the task names and occasionally snorting. Then she straightened, hands still on the WBS, and closed her eyes.



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WBS During the Planning & Approval Process

"I see the approval process to come," she whispered, swaying slowly from side to side, "Many people in pin-striped clothing will be very impressed by your WBS and will praise your work when you present this plan."

"This is amazing! How did you know they want highly detailed project plans?" the PM marveled.

"Because, my goblet of goulash, the world is full of nincompoops easily impressed by very long, detailed work breakdown structures. These nincompoops think that endless minutia leads to tight control and successful projects. In truth, it leads to crippling micro-management, inability to track progress, poor change control and project teams with little incentive to finish on time, much less finish early. Of course, maybe your project is so insignificant that these problems do not matter."

"No, it's about giving our customers world-class customer service. There'll be new systems and new processes to support them. The users are our partners and together we'll streamline the work flow, really use the power of automation...When we're done we'll delight the customer and provide world class service!"

Madam leaned back in her chair and wrapped her shawl more closely about her narrow shoulders, "My paprika peanut, you have no idea what you are supposed to achieve or how the user/client will measure it, do you?"

The PM sighed deeply, "Not the faintest idea. All I know are the features they want."

"Do you think that having them sign-off on this detailed list of activities, features and functionalities will protect you if they are dissatisfied by the business result at the end of the project? Or that their sign-off will prevent the list of new features, specifications and functionalities from growing every week?"

"Well, they signed off on the requirements and.... No, it's no protection at all, is it?"

"You are learning, my little stromboli. Your first job is not to get the user to signoff on detailed requirements and specifications. Your first job is to uncover what success the user wants. Then you break it down into smaller and smaller objectively measurable business achievements that become people's assignments."

"But the executives won't spend any time with me!"

"And with good reason. What are they accustomed to hearing from you when you do get a few minutes of their time?" Madam held up the thick WBS with a sneer as if it were a filthy rag, "They hear this kind of techno-babble. While you may have impressed them with your technical expertise, you also convinced them that you have little grasp or appreciation for the business problems they must solve. These executives think you're a geek, in love with only your technology not their business results."

The thoroughly humbled PM nodded meekly.

Madam swayed side-to-side several times and said, "I see that these same pin-striped people will be pleased that your project finishes on exactly the date they demanded."

The PM nodded but gave the Madam a suspicious look.

"But," she continued, "You know, in fact your whole team knows, you have no chance of hitting that date."

WBS as the Basis for Team Member Assignments

"My people are committed to their due dates!" The PM yelled.

"And how, my little strudel, were those hundreds of commitments developed?"

"Well, we examined each task and developed risk assessments, assumptions and alternative scenarios that allow us..."

To cut off the PM's babbling, Madam growled like a wolf, "You backed into the assignment due dates from the user's completion date and then told everyone what their date had to be, didn't you? Your WBS was so massive that actually negotiating work estimates, calculating durations and gaining commitment was impossible, wasn't it?" You rammed it down their throats like so much raw horse-radish."

The PM was aghast, "It won't be like that at all! My team is committed and accountable."

"But you do not trust them?"

"I trust them, we're a family!" The PM retorted.

"Then why is the average duration of your assignments on this WBS less than 2 days?"

"Well, there are a lot of complex judgments on this project and many steps to be taken."

"And you, in your great wisdom, can and must tell them each step to take?" The gypsy scoffed.

"If it's not in the plan, people won't do it! And we have standards on documentation, development processes, testing and approvals that must be followed!"

"Then, assign your people achievements with the constraint of meeting standard #37. All the minutia of standard #37 need not be in your WBS."

"Okay but we still need checklists to verify that things were done. That's what project management is all about."

"Noooo, my little saucer of sauerkraut, project management is about managing people so they achieve valued end results. On projects bigger than planting your herb garden, you manage people's achievements, their end results; not all the little activities they must perform. You must also decide how much problem solving to delegate to them. Only on herb garden projects can the PM solve all the problems. Your most capable people should have big achievements with lots of problem solving responsibility. Your new people and those in need of development get smaller achievements and less problem solving. But if all your assignments are tiny the whole project team will perform at less than their potential."

WBS Tracking and Change Control

The PM started to protest but saw that Madam PMBOK was back in her deep trance. After a few moments, she whispered, "Weeks have now passed. I see confusion in your mind after the project is underway. Your WBS is so detailed that you can't keep it current and you cannot track progress. Thus, my hasenpfeffer, your progress reports will be fantasies but no one will know because they can't measure progress either. The team will see you as fiddling with the details of their micro-tasks while the project and the whole team are consumed by a raging inferno of changes and missed dates."

I also foresee many changes coming from the users and executives. Your detailed requirements and WBS will give you little ability to distinguish changes or additions from those things that really were part of the original project. So you will resist every change like a Transylvanian werewolf because you have no ability to factually quantify the impact or discuss the trade-offs of any change."

"But if I just let them make changes they'll kill us. Change control is a battle."

"No, my garlic-soaked guava, change control is quantifying their impact on scope, cost, risk and duration so you can accommodate users within the framework of trade-offs."

The PM nodded grimly.

Recovery from a Grim Future

The PM, head hung, muttered, "So what do I do?"

Madam thought for a long moment and said, "Well, my pickled pumpkin, redo the WBS and give yourself a small project plan that is a hierarchy of measured business results. Then users and clients can look at it and see the business results they are buying and track progress against objectively measured end results. Your team members will know what a "good job" is before they start work rather than having to guess. Everyone will know how their achievement is linked to all the others. Change control can be based on data and all changes in features can be assessed based on if they contribute to the business results. Best of all, your small project plan is easy to keep current and you can update changes and spot problems in minutes each week."

"That sounds easy enough," the PM, said with a big smile of relief.

"It's not," Madam said, "You'll have to talk to users and clients and unearth the business problems they want to solve which is not easy. So you must learn to talk about their issues instead of your beloved technology. You'll also have to do much creative thinking with your team to conceive the achievements that will, in sum, deliver the project's end result. You will find that it was much easier to develop a long "to do" list WBS than a much smaller network of measurable achievements."

The PM nodded soberly then saw the wide grin on Madam's face, "Are you seeing a bright future for me?"

"Yes, my little dingle-hooper and a bright future for me as I spend all the money you owe me."

Summary

All the techniques in this article a part of our [Achievement-driven project Management](#) (AdPM™) methodology which we teach in [one-on-one courses](#) over the Internet as well as in-person [seminars for organizations](#).